

Violent Videos and Violent Video Games: Why do they cause violence and why do they sell?

L. Rowell Huesmann, PhD

Professor of Psychology and Communication Studies, *University of Michigan*

Past President, *International Society for Research on Aggression*

Testimony on May 4, 1999 before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation regarding "Marketing Violence to Children." Hearing chaired by Senator Sam Brownback.

Distinguished Senators, Ladies, and Gentleman. I am Rowell Huesmann, Professor of Psychology and Communication Studies at the *University of Michigan* and Past-President of the *International Society for Research on Aggression*.

I have been studying violent behavior for over 25 years. In 1972 I was the co-author of one of the major studies that influenced the Surgeon General to issue a warning about media violence. In 1982 I wrote the NIMH 10 year follow-up report on the influence of media violence, and most recently I was the primary author of the Human Capital Initiative report on violence.

It is a pleasure to be here today, although the message I want to deliver is not a pleasant message. My message is this. The telecommunications revolution of the 20th Century has created a new environment for our children. In this environment television, movies, videos, internet displays, and electronic games have assumed central roles in socializing our children while parents have lost influence. For better or worse the mass media are having an enormous impact on our children's values, beliefs, and behaviors. In particular, the widespread portrayal of violence in these media is having an insidious effect on increasing violence in society.

Now this is not to say that these media are the primary cause of violence in our society. That is not to say that other factors ranging from neurophysiological predispositions, to parenting failures, to impoverished environments, to violent environments, to the profusion of guns in our society are not important. They are! But so is the amount of violence to which are children are exposed in these old and new mass media every day. Not every child who watches a lot of violence or plays a lot of violent games will grow up to be violent. Other forces must converge as they did recently in Colorado. But just as every cigarette you smoke increases the chances that some day you will get lung cancer, every exposure to violence increases the chances that some day a child will behave more violently than they otherwise would.

. Hundreds of studies have confirmed that exposing our children to a steady diet of violence in the media makes our children more violence prone. The psychological processes involved are not

mysterious. Children learn by observing others, and the mass media provide a very attractive window for these observations. Children imitate the behaviors they see, and children deduce what is right and wrong from what they see. Children hone their ideas and behaviors by practicing them, by rehearsing them over and over. Games that reward success are a very good way to get children to practice a lot. As children observe more violence, imitate it, practice it, are rewarded for it, they become more tolerant of violence. For many children the greater tolerance for violence that they learn from the mass media and the scripts for violent behavior that they acquire from the mass media will not be very noticeable because of other countervailing factors in their lives. But media violence does affect every child.

Are these effects temporary? Unfortunately no. Research shows that the more aggressive child usually grows up to be the more violent adult. Adults may be resistant to influence from the games they play as adults and the movies and TV they watch, but their adult social habits have been affected by what they saw when they were children.

If this is true, you may say, why are there so many voices that won't accept these truths? Well, if one does not want to believe a truth about human behavior, one can always focus on exceptions. No single study is ever perfect particularly in the social sciences. A few researchers have made a reputation for themselves by burying the body of studies indicting media violence under a sand pile of supposed flaws, and a myth has arisen that there is not a consensus among researchers. In actuality there is a clear consensus that media violence stimulates aggression. But media violence is an enormous financial success. Violence attracts viewers and players, and violence can be a cheap way to attract. Even well intentioned people find it difficult to sacrifice concrete financial success for abstract moral advancement.

How much violence are our children exposed to in the electronic media? The average 7th grader is watching about 4 hours per day of TV and 60% of those shows contain some violence. The average 7th grader is playing electronic games at least 4 hours per week, and 50% of those games are violent. But these are only averages; many, many children are exposed to much more media violence every week. Because of demographic influences, many of the children who are exposed the most to media violence are also exposed the most to real violence around them. The two combine to reinforce children's views that the world is a hostile place in which one should retaliate if disrespected. The violence around the child constantly primes aggressive ideas. When angered, frustrated, stressed, it is perfectly understandable that a child exposed to all this violence behaves more violently.

Why is violence so attractive to children? Why do they watch violent shows and movies? Why do they buy violent games? Again psychologists understand this pretty well. We know children are attracted to visual action and movement and changes in scene and music and sound. Non-violent shows

like Sesame Street deliberately include these to attract children, but violent shows generally naturally have these characteristics. Children also find it pleasurable to be excited and then to have the excitement resolved the way a suspenseful scene with danger to a protagonist will do. Violent games reward children who kill more. For violent movies, if children identify with the hero, and they are likely to, they receive vicarious pleasure when the hero saves the world by killing the bad guy and being rewarded for his actions.

Is violence cheaper to produce? Violent and non-violent video games probably cost about the same on the average. However, violent TV shows appear to be a little cheaper to produce on the average. Statistics collected by Professor James Hamilton at Duke show that from 1991-93 the average production fee per hour for network prime time TV programming was about \$1,094K for non-violent shows and \$998K for violent shows – about 10% cheaper in other words. A more telling statistic may be the finding that, among shows with some violence, those with more violence actually cost less. Each additional violent act seems to reduce the cost about \$1,500.

Of course, these are only averages. A very high quality series such as ‘The Cosby Show’ with high priced actors, directors, and writers will cost a lot more than the average violent show. If it is a hit, it may produce enormous profits. If not, it may produce enormous deficits. What really counts is the ability of a video game to attract enough buyers to cover its cost, and the ability of a TV show to attract enough sponsors to cover its cost or to attract enough syndicated buyers.

Here, a variety of marketing issues become important. For example, foreign markets become very important in these calculations, and generally violent shows and games are easier to sell in foreign markets than other kinds of games or shows. Studies by James Hamilton at Duke have shown that the probability of a show being exported successfully increases about 16% if it is violent.

The bottom line is that children and adults are attracted to violence; and so violence makes money. But does that mean that nothing should be done?

Imagine that the Surgeon General is presented with a series of studies testing the harmfulness of a widely distributed product that many children love. There are an extensive number of well-controlled experiments spanning more than 30 years showing unambiguously that using this product immediately causes symptoms of a particular affliction in children. There are an equally large number of field surveys showing that the incidence of this affliction is always higher among people who use this product regularly. There are a smaller number of longitudinal studies that have examined the long term effects of this product in different environments. Most have shown at least some evidence of detrimental long term effects though it has been difficult to disentangle the product's long term effects from the effects of

those personal factors that cause people to use this product. Of course, not everyone who uses this product gets the affliction, and not everyone who gets the affliction has used the product. However, it is known from these studies that if a child with a 50% risk for getting this affliction uses the product, the best estimate of the child's risk for getting the affliction rises to between 60% and 70%. Moreover, the affliction is very difficult to cure, usually persists over years, and may well result in death. The processes by which the product produces the affliction have become well understood by scientists doing research in the area. Furthermore,, the incidence of the affliction has grown dramatically since the product was first introduced. However, because the product is attractive to many people and even addictive, it has achieved tremendous economic importance. What should the Surgeon General do?

As you probably recognize, this has been exactly the situation for cigarettes and lung cancer. But this has also been exactly the situation for media violence and violent behavior. The level of statistical evidence is actually just about the same in both cases – a correlation of about .3 between using the product and the affliction. Not everyone who uses the product gets the affliction, and other factors contribute to the affliction, but we know using the product increases the statistical risk. In both cases the Surgeon General long ago concluded that the substances were harmful and issued warnings about them. In both cases economic interests with large investments in the product feel threatened and have disparaged the research and opposed interventions to reduce use of the product.

So what is the solution? Better parental control, more government control, training children not to be affected by violent video games or media violence, electronic chips that cut out violence, boycotting sponsors and manufacturers of violence? All of these may be needed. Each society needs to make decisions based on what is best for it. But it is time for every society to take this problem seriously and act. The future of our children and society is too precious for us not to act.